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THE BOOK REPORT

Britain's Nightmare as
a Journalist's DreamBY ROBERT KIRSCH
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The Pincourt File by Barrie Penrose and Roger Courtiour (Harper & Row; \$12.95; illustrated)

Sir Harold Wilson resigned as Prime Minister on the same day that the separation of Princess Margaret and Lord Snowden was announced by a royal spokesman. Some people thought Wilson, who had intended to quit anyway, knew that his announcement would command media attention and take some sting out of the palace announcement. But there might have been another news item he was trying to eclipse: the sentencing of a pilot named Andrew Gino Newton to two years in jail for killing a dog belonging to a male model named Norman Scott.

All this might be the opening of a suspense novel. Readers have seen the matters covered in this book in the headlines. Scott claimed to have been the homosexual lover of Jeremy Thorpe, the leader of the Liberal Party in Britain. There were hints of blackmail and even alleged plans for rubbing Scott out and disposing of the body. One of the men who knows most about the affair, a former Liberal M.P. named Peter Bessell, who left England for Beverly Hills and Oceanside, is widely quoted in this book by two journalists who have worked for the BBC.

Penrose and Courtiour (the title is composed of the first syllables of each of their names) call the case one of the most cancerous political scandals of our time and charge that BOSS, the secret service of South Africa, has had a hand in the troubles of the Liberals (the South Africans don't like the Labor Party or most of the Conservatives, either); that the CIA had been involved at the fringes; that MI5, the supersecret British intelligence, had a cell of dissatisfied, disaffected maverick officials who wanted to have a go at the Labor and Liberal parties. Further, they contend, the whole thing, which culminated in Thorpe's departure as head of the Liberals, was the subject of a tripartisan cover-up.

Whether this is so is hard to tell from the text, which tends to be tedious and overwritten, employing a language of suspense without any feel of the exciting uncertainty which that term implies, hinting at certainties which are never delivered.

There are several other things wrong with this book, especially as far as American readers are concerned. The pace is slow, the characters as profuse and confusing as those in any 19th-century Russian novel. The use of British phrases ("Peter Bessell needed to keep only a watching brief on Norman Scott . . .") and the usages of the British welfare state (Scott's social benefits card, linking Thorpe to him as his employer, was seized when Thorpe did not make proper payments on it, a situation which denied Scott benefits and made him all the more nervous and angry) are difficult to follow.

The particular kind of overwriting involved is an excess of trivial facts. We follow the moods and nightmares of Norman Scott, a man so nervous and unreliable that to have him as a friend is the equivalent of keeping a piranha in the fish pond and trying to stroke it as if it were a carp. Sometimes he was cheerful, sometimes he was hysterical. His attitude toward horses seemed to me to be pre-adolescent. The trouble with Norman Scott is that he is boring. So is Jeremy Thorpe. So are all the rest of the Liberals, the South Africans and the MI5. After Churchill, Attlee and Macmillan came the pygmies.

Hubert Humphrey and CIA

In any event, the book, which begins with an invitation to the reporters by Sir Harold Wilson on May 12, 1976, two months after his resignation, ends with the former prime minister disputing the Pincourt version of what had occurred and why. I tend to believe them and not Wilson because they took steps to document the incidents with their employers. Wilson spilled his gut to them about the sinister role the South Africans were playing in British politics and the alleged role of the MI5 in smearing him. He told them he has asked Hubert Humphrey, his personal friend, to get the CIA to check the connections of two people he suspected had worked for them.

He told them to check on Norman Scott's file at the Chelsea office of the Department of Health and Social Security. He also took them to a wardrobe which disguised a seven-foot Chubb safe. There had been mysterious burglaries; documents had disappeared even at the House of Commons. "Keep me informed," the reporters say he told them. It was a journalist's dream.

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